

MATISSE

IMAGE INTO SIGN



THE SAINT LOUIS ART MUSEUM

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IMAGE INTO SIGN

JACK FLAM

THE SAINT LOUIS ART MUSEUM

February 19 - April 25, 1993

(cover)
THE DREAM, 1940
oil on canvas
31⁷/₈ x 25¹/₂ inches (81 x 64.8 cm)
Private collection

Design: Jon Cournoyer
Production: Vivian Brill
Typesetting: Wordsworth Typography, Inc.
Printing: Creative Printing Services, Inc.

©The Saint Louis Art Museum 1993
ISBN # 0-89178-037-8
Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 93-83434

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Foreword

This small, but excellent selection of works by Henri Matisse is the fourth special exhibition mounted by the Museum to honor the works of this modern French master. Forty years ago in 1953, a year before Matisse's death, the City Art Museum of St. Louis opened **Prints by Matisse**. The major exhibition, **Henri Matisse Paper Cutouts**, delighted our community in early 1978; a more specialized exhibition of Matisse's prints and illustrated books travelled here in late 1979. It is with great pleasure that this Museum is able to organize another exhibition, **Matisse: Image Into Sign**.

The grand enterprise of arranging large travelling exhibitions sometimes allows for unforeseen and wonderful opportunities. When it became apparent that our masterpiece, Matisse's 1908 *Bathers with a Turtle*, would be leaving the Museum for an extended period in The Museum of Modern Art's exhibition, **Henri Matisse: A Retrospective**, followed by a tour to the Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, we considered how to fill the gap. Fortunately, in exchange for the loan of our painting, the Centre Pompidou generously offered to lend eight works from Matisse's late period. That group, supplemented by a number of other instrumental works, comprised a striking sequence that illustrates Matisse's move from naturalistic representation to a system of abstract signs. The idea for this exhibition, first formulated by Jack Flam, who was studying that period of Matisse's work, and former Chief Curator Michael Shapiro, and successfully developed by Flam and curator Cara McCarty, resulted in the present exhibition: a fortuitous presentation of 25 outstanding works from one of the most important periods in Matisse's career.

In the course of making this exhibition we have worked with many private collectors and institutions. We are most grateful for their unstinting cooperation. It is a pleasure to work again with Jack Flam, who served the 1978 **Paper Cutouts** exhibition so well. Professor Flam not only conceived the theme of this exhibition, but selected the works and wrote the essay for this publication. Our colleagues at The Museum of Modern Art, especially the Departments of Drawings and the Registrar, merit special thanks. Their help in securing loans and expediting the shipment from New York has been most appreciated. We are particularly indebted to all the lenders. It is no exaggeration to say that without their participation this exhibition would not have occurred. Within the Museum, we thank Cara McCarty, curator of decorative arts and design, for assuming responsibility for this exhibition and moving it forward with flawless efficacy. Nick Ohlman, registrar, managed the complex demands of shipping, insurance, and security with aplomb. The Museum's publications department, directed by Mary Ann Steiner, brought order and clarity to this publication. Barbara Lieberman, senior administrative assistant, managed the complexities of correspondence and lists with great organization. Our thanks to them all.

James D. Burke
Director



Matisse: Image into Sign

Henri Matisse was born in 1869 and trained in the nineteenth-century academic tradition of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. Throughout most of his life he was strongly tied to that tradition, which he considered a standard of representation against which he could evaluate his own “departures from nature.” At the beginning of his career, he worked hard to develop the skills of rendering specific light, textures, and figures in a convincingly illusionistic space. But between the turn of the century and the first World War, he—like other artists of the time—reacted against such a naturalistic conception of painting. During those years Matisse produced a long sequence of radically simplified and abstracted works: The Saint Louis Art Museum’s *Bathers with a Turtle* of 1908 (Figure 1) is a prime example.

After the War, Matisse returned to a more realistic way of painting and increasingly involved himself in the depiction of fleeting effects of light and shadow, ambiances and moods. Works like *Odalisque with Red Culottes* of 1921 (No. 1) emphasized his continuity with such nineteenth-century masters as Eugène Delacroix and Pierre-Auguste Renoir.

By the mid-1920s, however, Matisse had become impatient with this manner of painting, and in works like *Decorative Figure on an Ornamental Ground* (No. 2) he gradually returned to the more abstract, modernist pictorial style that had established his reputation before the first World War. During the late 1920s, he sought to reconcile these different conceptions of painting, but for the first time since the beginning of his career he seemed to have lost a clear sense of direction in his work. Painting became difficult for him. His output fell off sharply and he sometimes had trouble finishing his pictures. He struggled for two years with *The Yellow Dress* (No. 3), a work that signals a new austerity and a new kind of near-symmetrical composition in his work.

A turning point in Matisse’s career came in 1930, when he accepted a commission to paint a mural for the Barnes Foundation in Merion, Pennsylvania (Figure 2). His work on the mural brought about a stylistic change characterized by a clear movement away from the depiction of things in an illusionistic space, as seen from a specific viewpoint and in a particular light and atmosphere. Instead he became increasingly involved with the evocation of things in a flattened and sign-like space.

While working on the mural, Matisse started to photograph his work in progress—evidence of his growing self-consciousness about the creative process. He also began to work with sheets of colored paper, which he could cut and pin to the mural’s surface in order to make quick compositional revisions. The use of cut paper, which generally encouraged Matisse to work in a flatter and more abstract way, would have important repercussions in his later work.

During the mid-1930s, Matisse consciously began to reconceive the forms in his paintings as ensembles of signs within an abstracted space. In fact, his earliest public statement

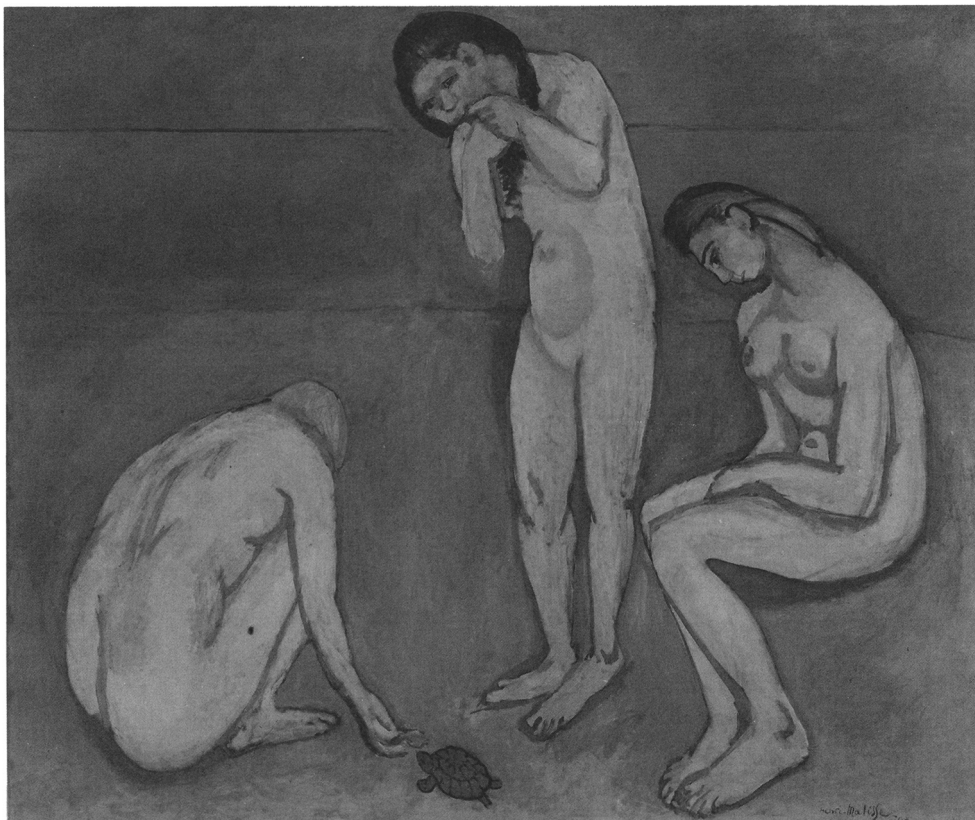


Figure 1
BATHERS WITH A TURTLE, 1908
 Oil on canvas; 179.1 x 220.3 cm.
 The Saint Louis Art Museum; Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Pulitzer, Jr.

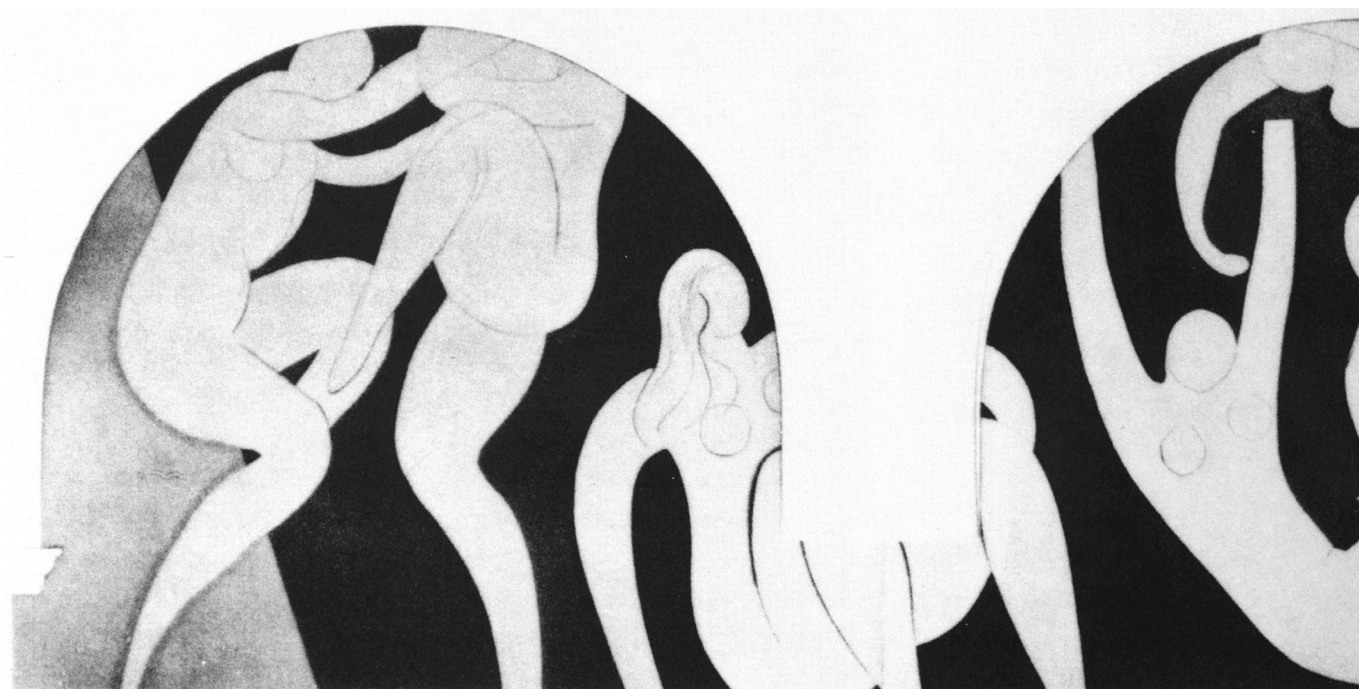
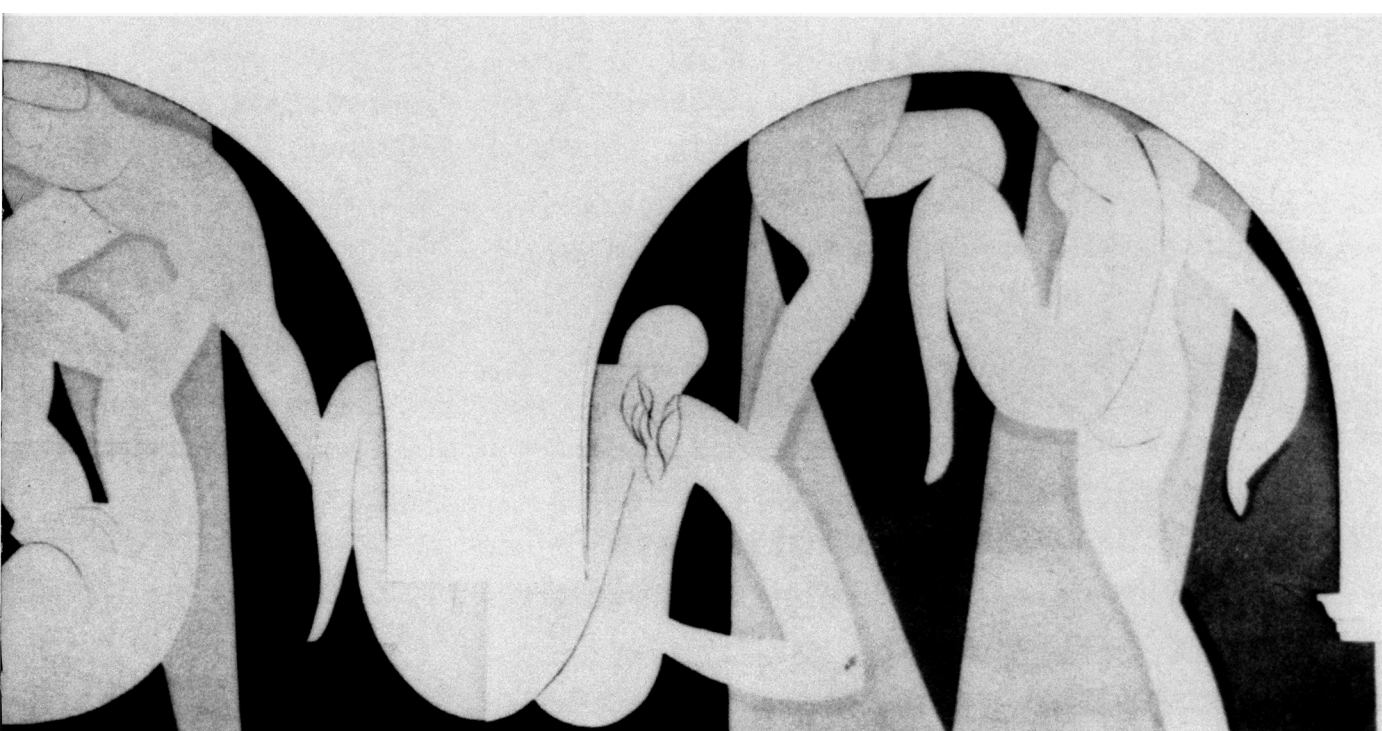


Figure 2
DANCE, 1932-33
 Oil on canvas, three panels; 385 x 475 cm., 400 x 500 cm., and 375 x 470 cm.
 The Barnes Foundation, Merion Station, Pennsylvania

about “signs,” in the sense that he would later come to use the word, dates from January 1932, when he told the critic E. Tériade that “a great painter is someone who finds personal and lasting signs that express in plastic terms the spirit of his vision.” In his earlier works, Matisse had conceived of his visual “signs” as constantly changing, and as having to be reinvented anew for each part of each painting. In his 1908 essay, “Notes of a Painter,” he had described the cumulative process of building up a picture in terms of a balancing of signs. In that context, however, he seems to have used the word *sign* as synonymous with *mark*. For at that time, he still conceived of each individual brushstroke as potentially acting as a discrete sign within a larger, somewhat fluid system of signifiers.

During the 1930s, Matisse sought a more permanent and stable notion of signs. In a number of paintings that were photographed in various stages while he worked on them, such as *The Dream* of 1935 (No. 5) and *Woman in Blue* of 1937 (No. 7), we can see the general way that Matisse was developing his paintings at this time. He started with an image that was obviously painted from observation: the subject was seen from a fairly specific viewpoint and included a good deal of incidental detail. Gradually, Matisse eliminated detail, simplified the forms, and flattened the space to eliminate the sense of specific viewpoint. The painting eventually becomes an ensemble of distilled pictorial signs which assert a certain independence from the total picture space. Objects are not merely contained by their surrounding space, but are set in an active dialogue with it. A new emphasis is given to flat areas of bright color and to rhythmic patterning.



The photographs that document the evolution of *Woman in Blue* (Figure 3) provide a particularly vivid example of this process of distillation. In the early stages, the woman leans rather casually on her left elbow. She is seen from a specific viewpoint, her dress is modelled and full of incidental details, and the room as a whole is described in a concrete way. As the work progresses, the sense of place begins to disappear and the forms become simpler and more flattened. The woman's pose changes from casual to crisp and stately, and her surroundings come to imply a symbolic commentary on her own hieratic being. The flat, abstracted rendering of the final painting is markedly different from the initial stages. It also offers a striking contrast with Matisse's earlier paintings, such as *The Yellow Dress* of 1929-31 (No. 3), which are rooted firmly in a specific time and space.

A similar comparison can be made between the 1935 and 1940 versions of *The Dream*. In the 1935 painting (No. 5), we view the woman from close proximity and sense that we have an intimate—almost voyeuristic—relationship to her. Though the spiral-like composition emphasizes her self-containment and isolation, we nevertheless sense that she is in a specific place within an implied room. In the 1940 version of *The Dream* (No. 13), however, the compositional format seems to evoke a state of being rather than to describe a physical condition. The flowing curvilinear forms, the vibrant colors, and the rhythmic linear patterning suggest the fluid and indefinite world of slumber and visions.

The ways in which Matisse balances observation and abstraction vary considerably during this period. Sometimes, as in *Interior with Etruscan Vase* of 1940 (No. 12), the picture space is delicately poised between being an evocation of a specific space and a more abstract conception. In this painting, we are presented with a continuous environment, but at the same time the objects within that environment are so discrete and flattened that they force us to recognize a more abstracted and sign-like space coexisting with the more literal one. A similar balance between the specific and the abstract is apparent in *Reader on a Black Background* of 1939 (No. 11), in which the merciless elimination of details heightens our awareness of the picture's metaphorical overtones: the woman in the drawing on the wall seems to burst forth from the vase of flowers.

Paintings like these reflect Matisse's decade-long preoccupation with developing the sign-like character of his work and emphasizing its symbolical implications. His best-known statement about signs was made in a 1942 conversation with his friend, the poet Louis Aragon, in which he said that "The importance of an artist is to be measured by the number of new signs he has introduced into the language of art..." As a result of what he called the "quest for signs," he told Aragon, he felt "absolutely obliged to go on searching for signs in preparation for a new development in my life as a painter."

During the 1930s Matisse was fascinated by the dichotomy between design and color—between drawing and painting. This is especially significant, since the interaction between drawing and painting had been a key element in the structure of Matisse's paintings during the great period from 1904 to 1917, and continued to be so through the so-called Nice period, from 1917 to 1929. In his paintings from that quarter of a century, the running dialogue between drawing and color, as well as the pentimento effects that call attention to the process of creation, are important aspects of the final image. The visible traces of constant redrawing and repainting constitute a record of the artist's struggle to balance his perceptions and his ideas, and give his picture-space a weight,



Figure 3
Four of the documented states of WOMAN IN BLUE of 1937.
(A) February 26, the first documented state; (B) March 13;
(C) March 23; (D) late April, the completed work (No. 7).

density, and amplitude akin to that achieved by Cézanne. Matisse rarely tried to invent what he had not actually seen; he created instead a painted space that expressed an equivalence of his vision, a balance between the urgency of direct experience and the complexity of one's reactions to such experience. Thus, with the notable exception of a few completely imagined compositions, such as *Dance* of 1909 (Figure 4), the picture space of his paintings is presented in terms of a fairly fixed viewpoint—as seen by the artist and witnessed by the viewer.

The separation between painting and drawing in Matisse's work during the 1930s coincided with his movement away from a naturalistic viewpoint. These characteristics reflect an important change in his notion of how pictorial space can be made to signify both the physical world and states of mind. While the pen and ink drawings of this period stress spontaneity and barely arrested motion, his paintings are often extremely calculated and distilled, and suggest a sense of timelessness. When in 1936 Matisse spoke of a return to the bold color of Fauvism, he was no longer thinking in terms of Fauve space, in which the violent, often unpredictable interaction of color and drawing was paramount, but of a flatter, more static, conception in which color and drawing are set against each other in measured counterpoint. The most important paintings of this period, such as *Woman in Blue* (No. 7), are eloquent evidence of this change. Drawing is limited to the definition of contour and pattern. Although still working from life, Matisse was already moving toward the kind of imagery that would characterize the early cutouts: moving from the description of objects in their surrounding space to the evocation of objects by signs; from a tangible space to a suggested space; from images based on what is directly seen and felt to images based on what is recollected and thought; from the individual to the typical.

Matisse's paintings through the end of the 1920s give ample evidence of the actual process of painting, and their lack of "finish" is often an implicit part of their subject matter. This emphasis on process makes the viewer intensely aware of the difficulties involved in the work's creation. Matisse's paintings after 1935, by contrast, frequently look as if they were finished in a single sitting (even though this was actually not the case). They suggest ease rather than difficulty. Since Matisse had them photographed while he was working on them, we are aware of how arduous the process of their creation was. But we are aware of this only through external documentation. In the works themselves, Matisse went out of his way to eliminate, as much as possible, evidence of the radical reworking and revision that went into their creation. This is especially apparent in *The Conservatory* of 1938 (No. 8). The surface of this picture is so light and fresh (and full of spontaneous gestures, such as the elegantly drawn pencil lines inscribed into the paint) that one would never be able to guess just how extensively it was reworked if it had not been repeatedly photographed between the time it was started (November 16, 1937) and its completion six months later (May 25, 1938).

Matisse described the dynamics of this process of reworking in a 1936 statement to Tériade: "The reaction of each stage is as important as the subject. For this reaction comes from me and not from the subject. It is from the basis of my interpretation that I continually react until my work comes into harmony with me. As the way someone writing a sentence rewrites it, makes new discoveries... At each stage, I reach a balance, a conclusion. At the next sitting, if I find a weakness in the whole, I find my way back into the picture by means of the weakness—I re-enter through the breach—and reconceive the whole."

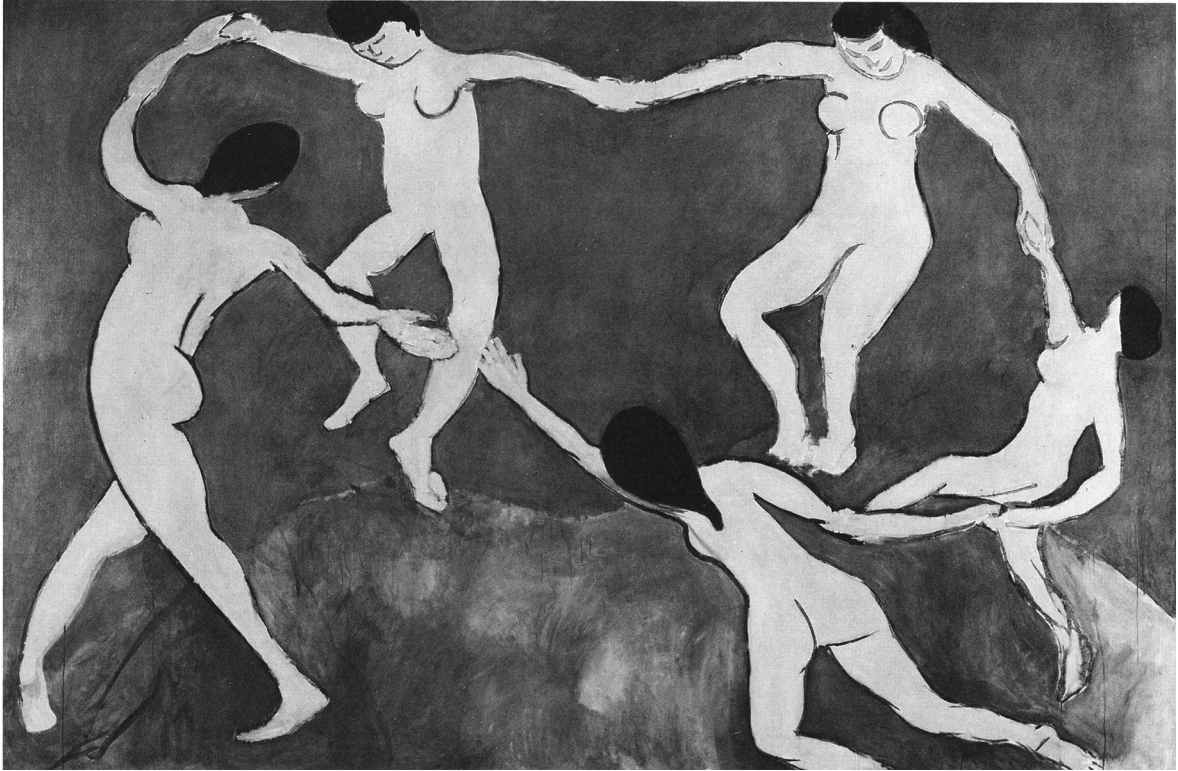


Figure 4
DANCE (I), 1909
Oil on canvas; 259.7 x 390.1 cm.
The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of
Nelson A. Rockefeller in honor of Alfred H. Barr, Jr.



Matisse began to use cut paper as a medium in itself during the late 1930s, and the process of de-localization that he had begun in his recent paintings was pushed even further by his new technique. The imagery of the paper cutouts is generally not based on direct perception but on memory, imagination, and myth. The cutout forms were conceived right from the beginning as abstract signs for objects rather than as images of specific objects in a tangible space.

The new medium of cut paper allowed Matisse to resolve the problem of simultaneous drawing and color in a new way: by virtually eliminating the painting process. With the cutout technique, the artist no longer applied color to a surface, but cut shapes from already painted sheets of color which were then applied to a surface. (According to his studio assistant, Matisse almost never colored the paper himself.) Color was an abstract entity, unshaped and as yet uncommitted to a particular place within the image. "Cutting straight into color reminds me of the direct carving of the sculptor," Matisse wrote in his book *Jazz*, published in 1947. He also referred to the process as drawing with scissors, "one movement linking line with color, contour with surface."

Analogies with sculpture and drawing, however, can be misleading. For although Matisse may be said to have sculpted or drawn with scissors, the act of cutting was only part of the procedure. The artist had still to set his forms within a context. This delay between the shaping of the form and the placement of the form within the picture is an important one; it introduced an element of discontinuity that is carried out in the images themselves. It helped the artist to deconstruct continuous space.

We have seen how Matisse used cut paper and in-progress photographs as diagnostic devices for his paintings during the 1930s. In the fully developed cutout technique, the opportunity for diagnosis and quick revision is built right into the medium. A form is invented (not depicted) and put whole into the picture, provisionally tipped in with a pin or a bit of paste; sometimes it works, sometimes it does not. And if it does not, it can be lifted and placed somewhere else.

The cutout technique, by introducing decorative, all-over imagery, also projects a new sense of time: everything happens at once. The spontaneous, synchronic feeling of the images removes them from the context of actual experience. Form and space are translated into a kind of sign language, which is similar, in its abstractness, to written language. The implications of this new kind of figuration are many.

Every time a shape is cut out of paper, another shape, a negative image of the first, is also cut. The artist is thus able to create something like a repertory of forms, which can be rearranged, interchanged, and even stored away for future use. The artist can save, reuse, and rearrange specific forms the way a poet reuses and recombines previously discarded words, phrases, or images.

The “sign” aspect of the individual forms of the late cutouts extends to the total images as well. Unlike the imagery of most of Matisse’s earlier paintings and drawings, the cutouts do not imply a specific position for the viewer *vis à vis* the image. To an unprecedented degree, their imagery occurs, like that of poetry, “in the mind.”

This new pictorial vocabulary allowed Matisse to revitalize his art during the last decade of his life. With it, he was able to treat a number of new themes and give new form to some old ambitions. Works like *Amphitrite* (No. 21), done in 1947, deal with mythological and poetic themes. In this and other cutouts from the late 1940s, fragmentary allusions to myth and poetry are suggestively juxtaposed, creating a kind of non-linear narrative content. The cutouts also allowed Matisse to give a fresh kind of energy to the decorative concerns that had been so important to him throughout his career. Drawing upon rhythmic and floral elements that had already been present in paintings like *The Conservatory* of 1938 (No. 8) and *Music* of 1939 (No. 9), Matisse was able to apply his new formal vocabulary to a wide range of decorative compositions. These ranged from small but concentrated ensembles such as *Composition with a Red Cross* of 1947 (No. 22), to large architectural projects such as *Christmas Eve* of 1952 (No. 24). In this, and in a number of other grandly conceived architectural projects, Matisse seems to reflect the kind of inner vision that had led him a decade earlier to speak of “an unconscious belief in a future life...some paradise where I shall paint frescoes...”

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*In art, truth and reality begin when
you no longer understand anything
you do or know... You clearly must have all
your accomplishments behind you,
and have known how to keep your Instinct fresh.*

Henri Matisse, 1947



1. ODALISQUE WITH RED CULOTTES, 1921
oil on canvas
26³/₈ x 33¹/₈ inches (67 x 84 cm)
Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris
Gift of the State



2. DECORATIVE FIGURE ON AN ORNAMENTAL GROUND, 1925-26
oil on canvas
51 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 38 $\frac{5}{8}$ inches (130 x 98 cm)
Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris
Gift of the State



3. THE YELLOW DRESS, 1929-31

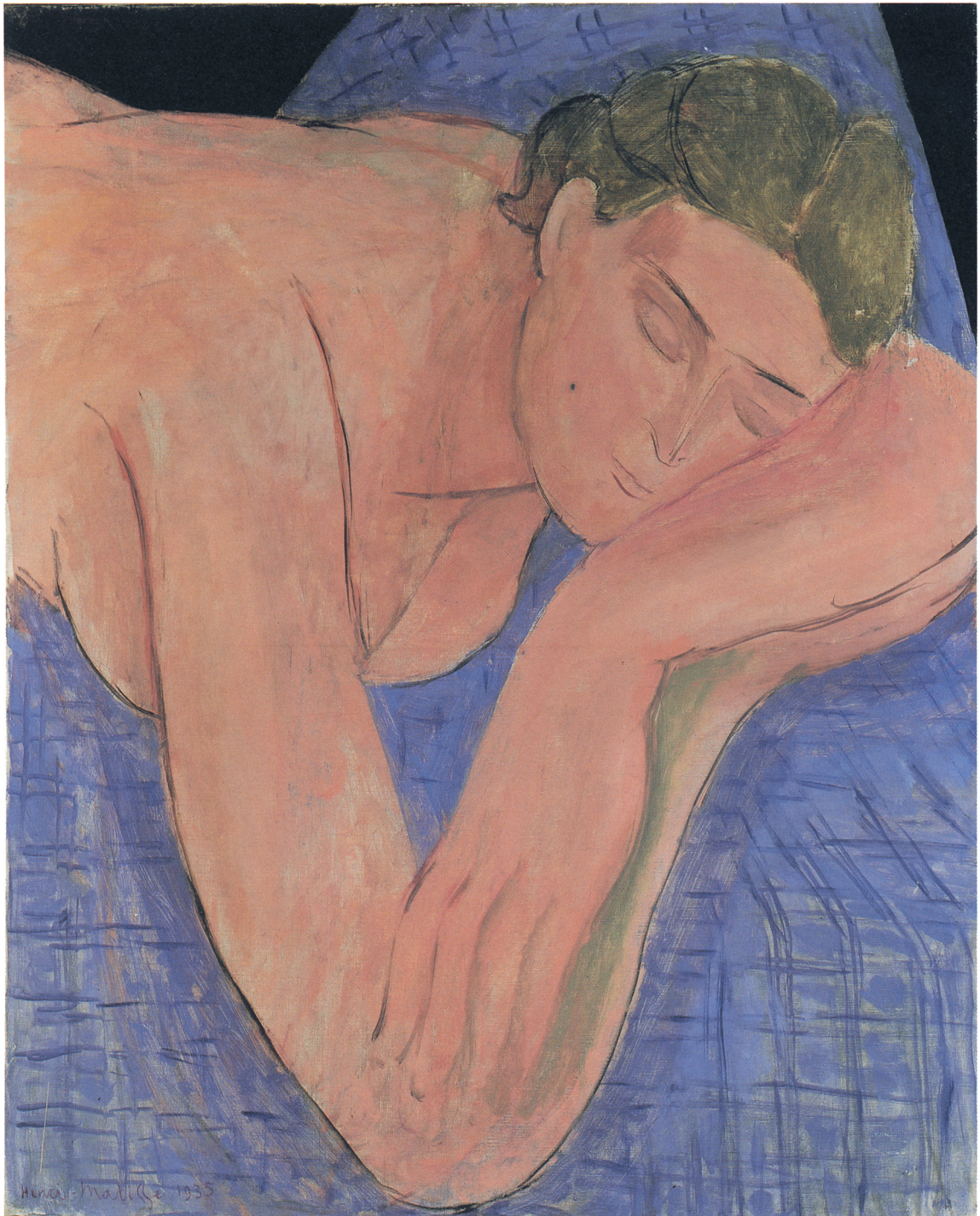
oil on canvas

39 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 31 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches (99.7 x 80.7 cm)

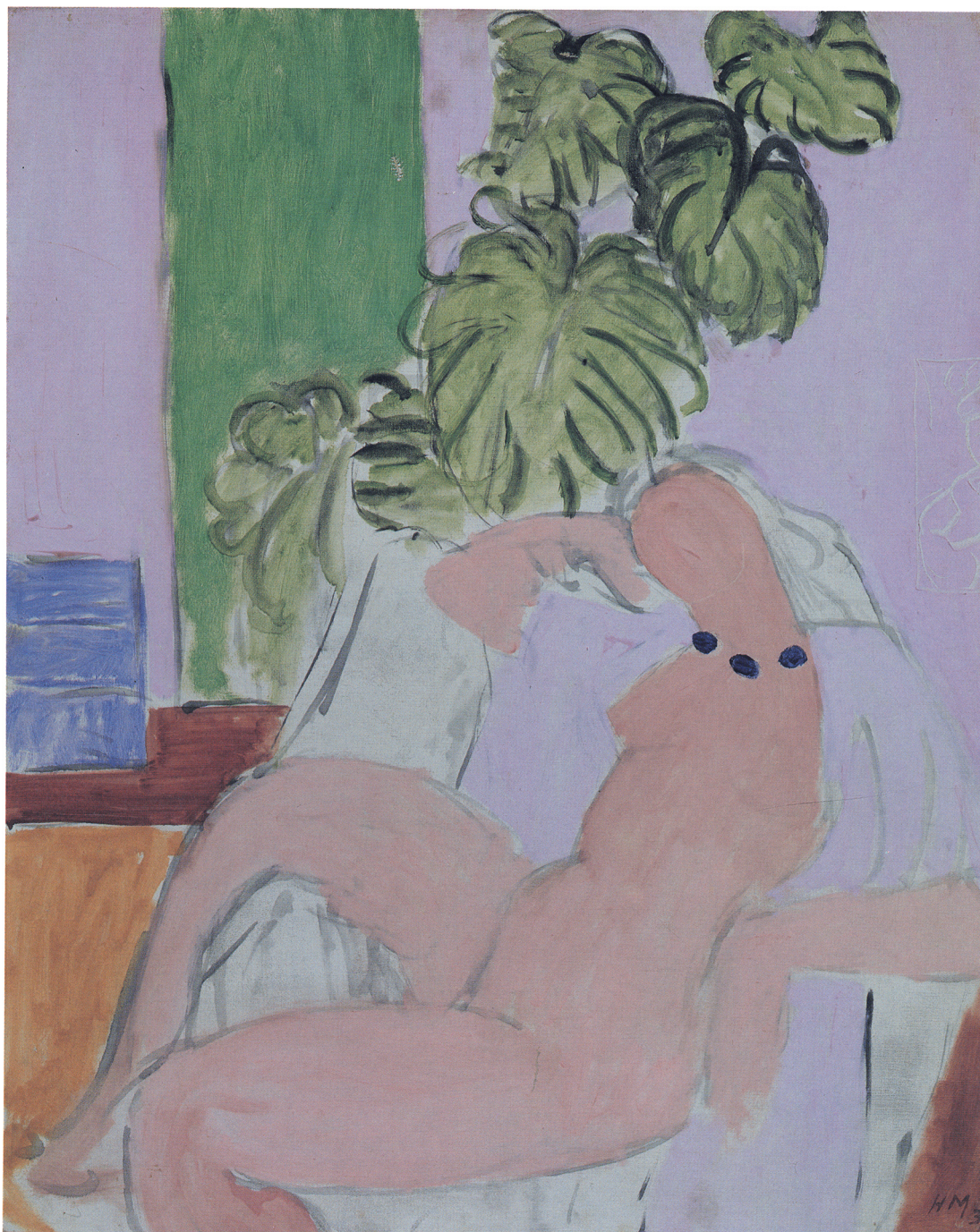
The Baltimore Museum of Art: The Cone Collection, formed by
Dr. Claribel Cone and Miss Etta Cone of Baltimore, Maryland



4. WOMAN IN ARMCHAIR, 1936
charcoal on paper
21 x 15¹⁵/₁₆ inches (53.2 x 40.5 cm)
The Saint Louis Art Museum



5. THE DREAM, 1935
oil on canvas
31⁷/₈ x 25⁵/₈ inches (81 x 65 cm)
Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris



6. NUDE IN ARMCHAIR, 1936-37
oil on canvas
28½ x 23¾ inches (72.5 x 60.5 cm)
Musée Matisse, Nice



7. WOMAN IN BLUE, 1937
oil on canvas
36½ x 29 inches (92.7 x 73.7 cm)
Philadelphia Museum of Art: Gift of Mrs. John Wintersteen



8. THE CONSERVATORY, 1938
oil on canvas
28 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 23 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches (71.8 x 59.7 cm)
Private collection



9. MUSIC, 1939
oil on canvas
45³/₈ x 45³/₈ inches (115.2 x 115.2 cm)
Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York. Room of
Contemporary Art Fund



10. DAISIES, 1939
oil on canvas
38⁵/₈ x 28¹/₄ inches (98 x 71.8 cm)
The Art Institute of Chicago. Gift of Helen Pauling
Donnelley in memory of her parents, Mary Fredericka and
Edward George Pauling



11. READER ON A BLACK BACKGROUND, 1939
oil on canvas
36 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 29 inches (92 x 73.5 cm)
Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris



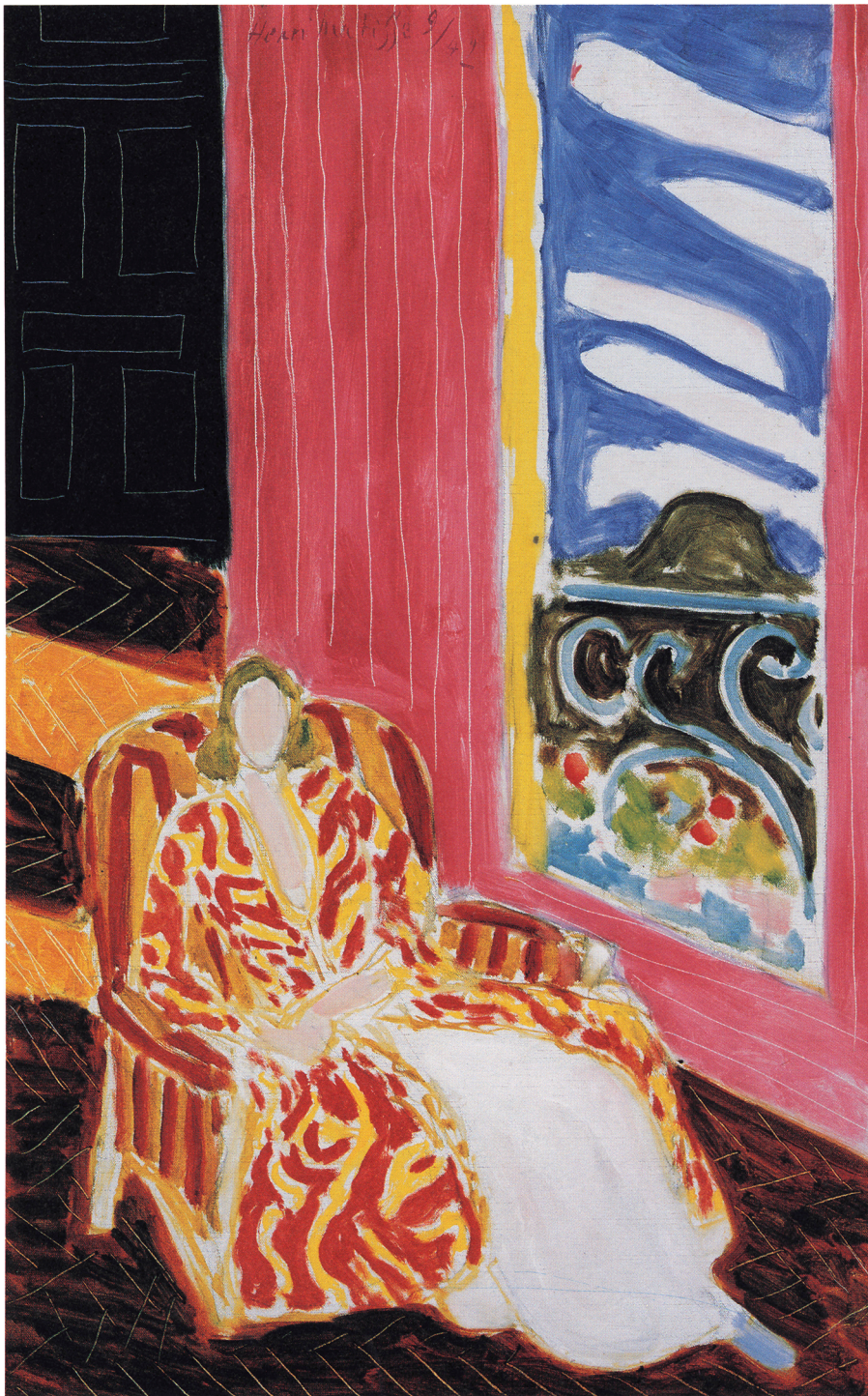
12. INTERIOR WITH AN ETRUSCAN VASE, 1940
oil on canvas
29 x 42½ inches (73.6 x 108 cm)
The Cleveland Museum of Art. Gift of the Hanna Fund



13. THE DREAM, 1940
oil on canvas
31⁷/₈ x 25¹/₂ inches (81 x 64.8 cm)
Private collection



14. STILL LIFE WITH A MAGNOLIA, 1941
oil on canvas
29¹/₈ x 39³/₄ inches (74 x 101 cm)
Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris



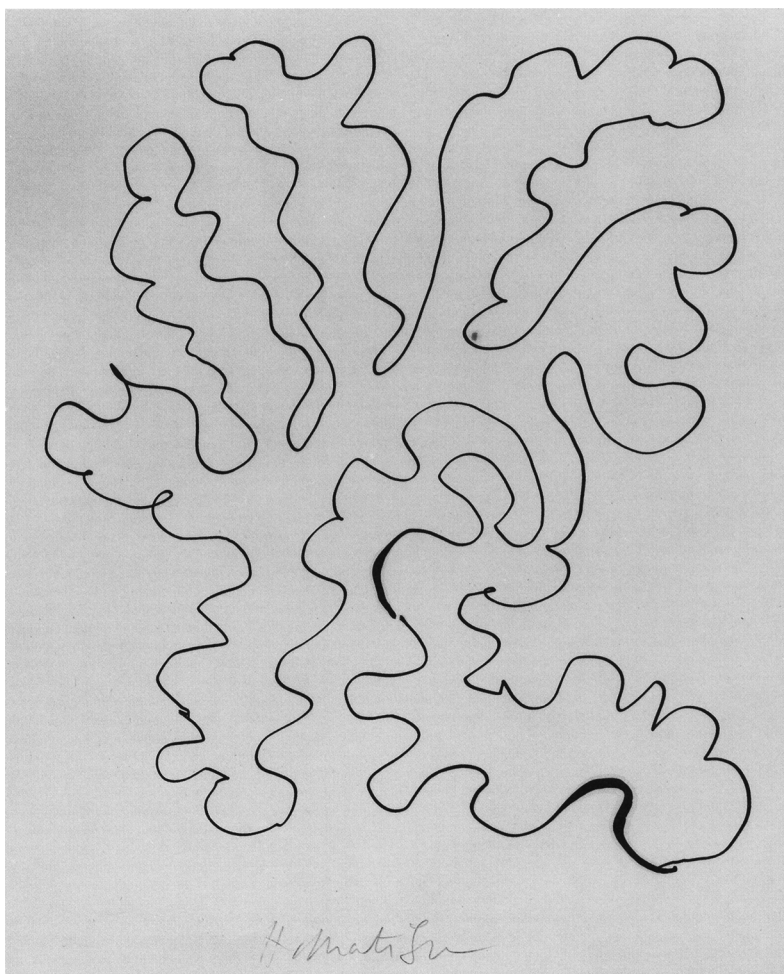
15. THE BLACK DOOR, 1942
oil on canvas
24 x 15 inches (61 x 38 cm)
Mr. and Mrs. William R. Acquavella



16. LEMONS AND SAXIFRAGES, 1943
oil on canvas
21 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 31 $\frac{7}{8}$ inches (54 x 81 cm)
A. Rosengart, Lucerne



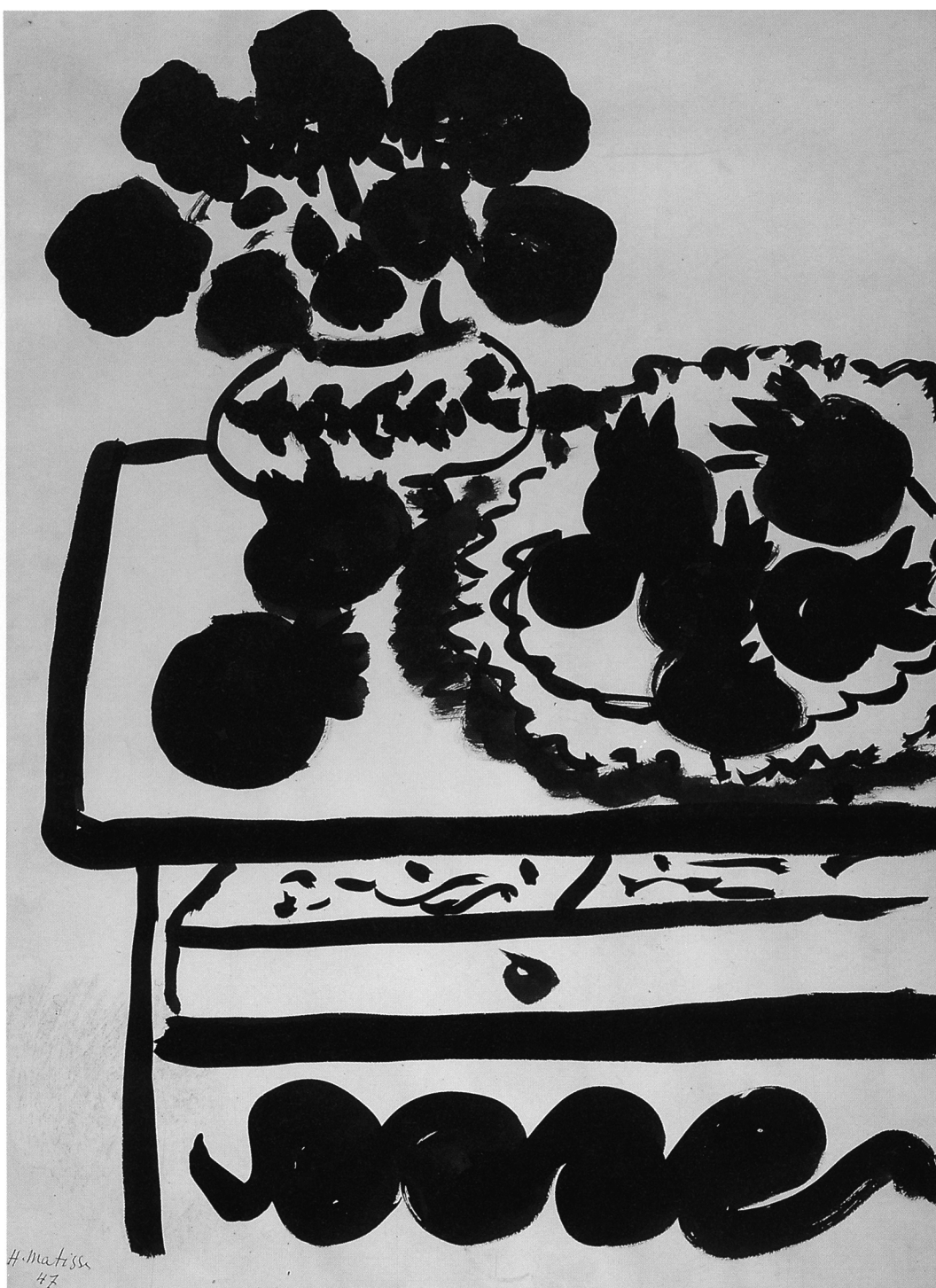
17. UNTITLED (BRANCH OF MEDLAR-TREE), 1944
crayon on paper
16 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 12 $\frac{5}{8}$ inches (42 x 32 cm)
Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris
Gift of Mme. Jean Matisse



18. UNTITLED (LEAF), 1944-47
pen and ink on paper
10¹/₈ x 8¹/₄ inches (25.6 x 21 cm)
Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris
Gift of Mme. Jean Matisse



19. DAHLIAS, POMEGRANATES AND PALM TREES, 1947
brush and ink on paper
30 x 21⁷/₈ inches (76.2 x 56.5 cm)
Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris
Gift of Pierre Matisse



20. DAHLIAS AND POMEGRANATES, 1947
brush and ink on paper
30 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 22 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches (76.4 x 56.5 cm)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Fund



21. AMPHITRITE, 1947
 gouache on paper, cut and pasted
 33⁵/₈ x 27⁵/₈ inches (85.5 x 70 cm)
 Mr. and Mrs. William R. Acquavella



22. COMPOSITION WITH A RED CROSS, 1947
 gouache on paper, cut and pasted
 29¹/₈ x 20⁵/₈ inches (74.1 x 52.4 cm)
 Mrs. Maruja Baldwin



23. STILL LIFE WITH POMEGRANATES, 1947
oil on canvas
31³/₄ x 23⁵/₈ inches (80.5 x 60 cm)
Musée Matisse, Nice



24. CHRISTMAS EVE, 1952
 gouache on paper, cut and pasted
 127 x 53½ inches (312.8 x 135.9 cm)
 The Museum of Modern Art, New York
 Gift of Time, Inc.



25. BLACK LEAF ON RED GROUND, 1952
gouache on paper, cut and pasted
19³/₄ x 15³/₄ inches (50 x 40 cm)
Georges and Lois de Ménéil, New York

